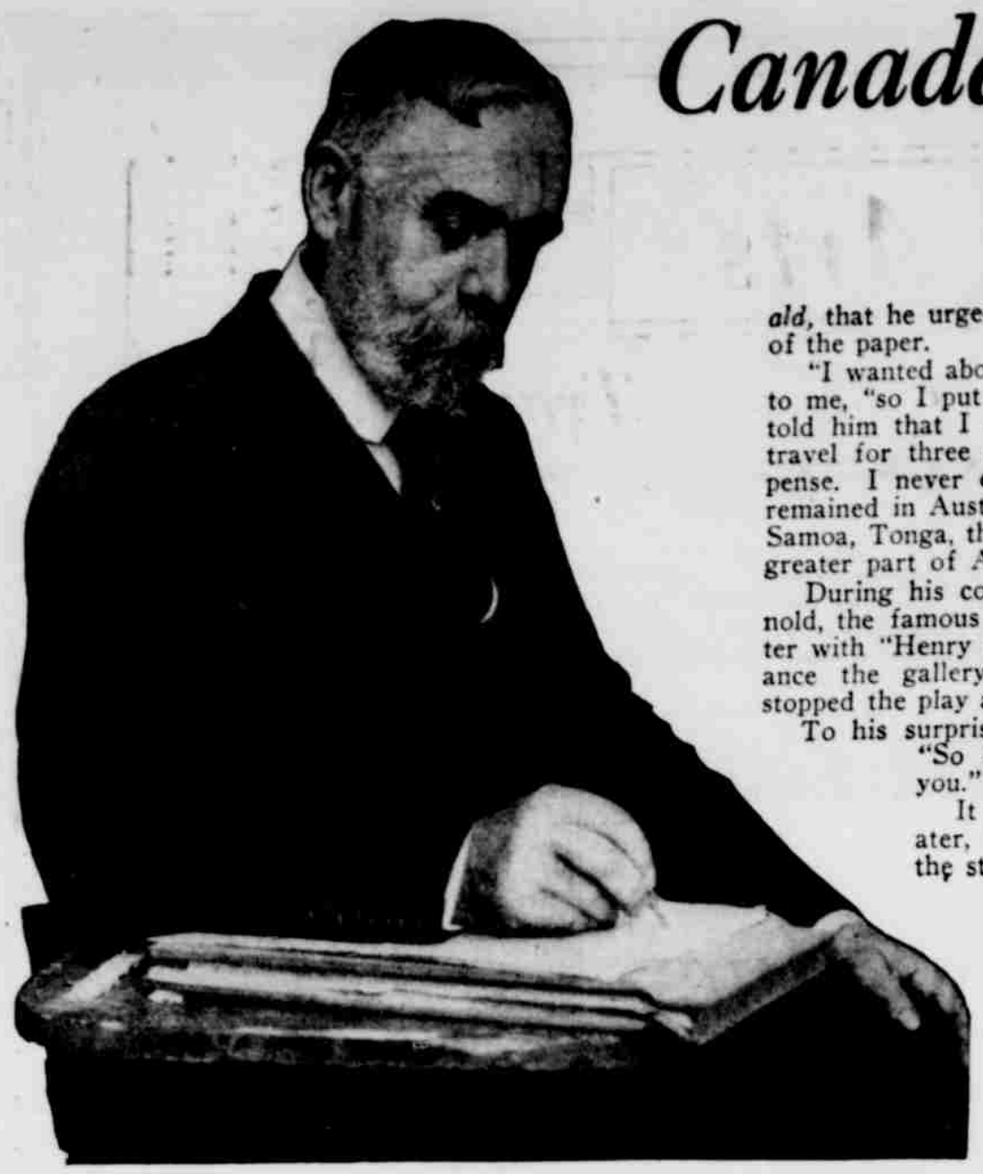
Canada's First, Greatest Author

By JOHN B. WALLACE



SIR GILBERT PARKER

MANY honors have come to Sir Gilbert Parker during his long and useful career but the one of which he is most proud is the distinction of having been the man who put Canada on the literary map. Before he, then an unknown youth, appeared in London with a bulky roll of manuscript under his arm, some time during the late eighties, the great northern province of Great Britain was a closed book to the realm of fiction. No native authors had appeared and such outsiders as had written of it had touched it but incidentally and sketchily. Since then Canada has produced two other authors who perhaps deserve to be ranked with Parker, namely, Basil King and Ralph Connor, besides a number of lesser lights. But Parker was the pioneer in this great undeveloped field. And like most pioneers, his own country was the last to recognize his genius.

Sir Gilbert Parker is a rather compactly built man of medium height. His beard and hair are shot with gray. His whole personality radiates kindliness and sincerity. His manner is entirely frank and unaffected. He either says what he thinks or he says nothing. He is the kind of a man whom a child would instinctively call grandpa.

I do not wish to convey the impression that he is senile; on the contrary, he is a man of vigor, both physically and intellectually.

Like all big men Sir Gilbert has his foibles. For instance, he complained rather plaintively because he was not given his full title of Right Honorable in this country. For his services during the World War, Sir Gilbert was made a privy councillor and a baronet by the British Crown. He had been previously knighted in recognition of his literary genius.

It seemed strange to me that a man who had written "The Right of Way" and "The Seats of the Mighty" should worry about a trivial matter of title. especially as the average citizen of the United States would not know what the title privy councillor meant. In fact, I'll confess I didn't know myself until I looked it up.

Perhaps something of this appeared in my face because Sir Gilbert explained to me that honors of such sort were given in England as rewards of merit and were valued as highly as our soldiers would value a distinguished service cross.

"For instance, men like the Honorable Cabot Lodge would be highly insulted in England if we left off the Honorable," he said. "Your Senators and other public men are most punctilious about such matters when abroad."

I have found Britons from the provinces, especially those in whom the title was not hereditary but had been conferred because of services to the Crown, to be much more sensitive about titles than English-born lords of ancient lineage who for the most part seem to consider their dignities to be more or less of a bore.

Sir Gilbert Parker was born in a small town in Ontario, Canada. Both his father and his grandfather were soldiers and officers in the British Army. His grandmother was a native of Ireland.

"I am very proud of my Irish blood," he told me. "Whatever of imagination I have, I owe to it. The Irish brogue always came natural to me, even as a boy. The Irish verses in my books are my own."

Sir Gilbert developed a taste for books and writing when but a young boy.

"It seems as if I have always written," he said.

When he was twenty-two he went to Australia, landing there with but $150 and owing $2,000 to a relative. Today he is several times a millionaire and all of his fortune has come from his books.

He had been in Australia less than a year when he was made associate editor of the Sydney *Morning Herald*. He had no intention of staying in Australia, being in fact on his way to England. A series of articles which he had written about the country during a trip through New South Wales and Southern Australia had so interested Sir James Fairfax, the owner of the *Herald*, that he urged him to stay and remain on the staff of the paper.

"I wanted above all to travel," Sir Gilbert explained to me, "so I put up a bluff, as you Americans say. I told him that I would stay if he would allow me to travel for three months every year at the paper's expense. I never expected him to agree but he did. I remained in Australia three and one-half years visiting Samoa, Tonga, the South Sea Islands and covering the greater part of Australia and Tasmania."

During his connection with the paper George Rignold, the famous Australian actor, opened a new theater with "Henry the Fifth." Throughout the performance the gallery made such a noise that Rignold stopped the play and made a plea for silence.

To his surprise, a voice from the gallery shouted,

"So help me God, George, we can't see you."

It developed that in building the theater, the architect had cut off a view of the stage from more than half the gallery.

Sir Gilbert's account of this incident and his review of the play caused Rignold to send for him and the result was that he was commissioned to write three plays. Two of these were highly successful, the other was a failure.

When Parker finally arrived in England he carried with him a bag containing the manuscript of twenty-two short stories. He asked Archibald Forbes, the war correspondent and himself a writer of note, to read them and give him a candid opinion as to their merit.

"Forbes asked me out to lunch a few days later," Sir Gilbert said. "He said nothing about the stories during the meal but afterward when we were walking down the street he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Parker, that is the best collection of titles I have ever seen.' I understood. That night I went home and burned them all. I saw that I had not yet learned my trade."

Parker had written a book of travel called "Round the Compass" that had not been altogether unsuccessful but he still clung to the idea that he could write fiction. One day as he was walking down the Strand he saw in a window a trapper's outfit. It carried his mind back to his boyhood home in Canada. He went to his lodgings that evening and started on a collection of short stories called "Pretty Pierre." These were successful from the start. In 1895 he wrote "The Seats of the Mighty" and in 1901 came his greatest success, "The Right of Way." One million copies of this book have been sold in the United States alone.

In 1902 he was knighted in honor of his literary fame.

"The United States has always been the largest purchaser of my books," he said. "It has a much larger reading public than England. I would have starved to death if I had depended upon Canada to purchase my books. It was the last to recognize me. Since then, however, it has been a constant and devoted customer."

Sir Gilbert had a narrow escape from losing the copyright of the first book to be published in the United States. When he landed at New York he had only two days to get a copy printed before the time limit expired. He had known Thomas Nelson Page when the latter was ambassador to England and he immediately sought his advice upon landing. Page gave him a card to a certain publishing house. The publisher threw up his hands and cried "impossible" when Sir Gilbert made known his desire. The card from Page altered matters, however, and within thirty-six hours the book was printed and bound.

Archibald Clavering Gunter, known as a writer of what was then termed yellow back novels—a term which implied a trashy character—had just established a publishing house of his own and he bid for Parker's first novel. Sir Gilbert sought Page's advice.

"It doesn't matter who publishes it," Page told him. "If the book has merit it will sell." Parker found this to be true as he had instantaneous and phenomenal success.

During the World War, Sir Gilbert was director of American publicity and among his duties was the task of reading some eighty American newspapers a day. Notwithstanding this punishment he is a devoted friend of America and all things American.

In speaking of England renewing the alliance with Japan I asked him in the event of war between the United States and Japan where England would stand.

"In the first place there will be no war," he said earnestly. "Japan is too shrewd to engage in war with a country of the proved power of the United States. But should such a thing come you will find England's fleet patrolling the Pacific with that of the United States. England wants a yellow race on the American continents no more than does the United States."

Changing the subject from politics, I asked Sir Gilbert whom he considered the greatest living American author.

He held up his hand. "No, you don't," he countered. "If you want me to tell you whom I consider the greatest dead American authors I will do so."

So I compromised.

He named Mark Twain, W. D. Howells and Henry James of the modern schools.

"What do you consider of the greater importance in a novel or short story, plot or character?" I asked, knowing that he was writing for the motion pictures where plot and action are the main objects.

"By all means, character," he replied. "No novel can live on plot. Given the character, it will make the plot. My two most successful books, 'The Right of Way,' and 'The Seats of the Mighty,' were built upon the characters of Charley Steele and Doltaire. The latter was a living character. If you will change the D to V you will perceive upon whom it is modeled. As for style that is the writer, himself. No one can successfully imitate style."

The Sunday Blues

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nor group of men, under any name or organization, has the right to say what kind of Sunday we must have. It is our American right and privilege to decide that for ourselves. Personally, I do not want the Lord's Day Alliance or any other alliance to dictate to me, through any means whatsoever, as to how I shall spend Sunday. I think I am quite as capable of deciding that as they are; so is every other American citizen, unless I have mistaken faith in my countrymen."

Meantime the crusaders are hard at work at the nation's capital where they are framing drastic legislation which they hope to get enacted.

They are not entirely unpractical or unbusiness-like in their methods at Washington—neither do they boast that they expect to be victorious at once. This is to be their initial drive, and if they are able even to bring about the passage of laws restricting the Sunday amusements of the District of Columbia, they will be quite satisfied. Other reforms will come later. Supporting their organization in the Senate is Senator Jones, of Washington, while in the House, Representative Temple, of Pennsylvania, is the champion of their viewpoint. Eventually, they hope to pass a twentieth amendment to the Constitution, including a code for Sunday and for divorces. Prominent in the movement at Washington is Dr. E. C. Dinwiddie, and Miss Laura B. Church, both noted for their aggressive work with the Anti-Saloon League.

However, the opposition is very strong even at the present, when, unlike the blue law believers, it is absolutely unorganized.

A prominent surgeon laughed at the "one day in seven" laws, and asked what would happen if such laborers as doctors and nurses were to consider such an action!

"Let us go slowly," warns Judge Mitchell May in addressing a grand jury recently, "before enacting antiquated, discarded and unnecessary laws that may bring down upon our heads a feeling of discontent, dissatisfaction and unrest, and which may fan anew the flames of Bolshevism.

"The man who is happy and contented," he continued, "is in a receptive mood for religion. He is most likely to offer thanks in his own way for the great benefits he receives, he is most likely to make a good citizen, for he understands what his government has done for him. Let us enact laws which command respect and let us support those enacted."

The evangelist, Elmer E. Franke, when asked his reaction to Puritanical Sundays, stigmatized blue laws as "the big stick of religious bigotry and intolerance."

A Unitarian minister, the Reverend Dr. Charles Francis Potter, speaking recently at Columbia University on the "Relapse Into Blue Laws," declared the world had outlived the Ten Commandments and was no longer bound by the taboo of a small tribe in Asia promulgated 3,000 years ago; that no group of men and women should decide how other groups should live on Sunday.

The Reverend Dr. Wilbur F. Crafts, head of the International Reform Bureau, denies emphatically that his organization is supporting the Lord's Day Alliance, as has been represented in the press of the nation.

Massachusetts, judging from the results of the December municipal elections (practically the first elections since these laws have come into general discussion) doesn't want a blue Sunday, for a referendum taken in twenty-one cities generally supports the liberal view of the Sunday question. They want clean, inoffensive Sunday afternoon amusement.

The famous Congregationalist minister, the Reverend Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, believes in a modification of the present Sunday laxity, in regard to commercial amusements, for example, but he does not favor extreme blue laws.

Just what the Sunday blues would mean can be imagined from the pen picture of Sunday in the city of Glasgow, Scotland, where Sabbath Day laws were very rigid some fifty years ago.

"Sunday morning was the most peaceful period of Sabbath Day observances. The window blinds were drawn. No self-respecting family ever allowed the sun to shine in its windows on the Sabbath. The husband, probably sleeping off his liquor of the night before, did not enter into the family life for the time being. The children and women of the household drew long faces and went to church.

"In the afternoon the family would assemble in the house behind the drawn blinds. This was the time when recriminations and family rows were the indoor pastime."